

THE INTERNET AS A TEACHING AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENT TOURISM

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Abstract

Tourism and hospitality education departments are facing the challenge of determining the extent to which the Internet should be part of the teaching and learning environment.

The relationship between tourism education and the Internet can be viewed from three perspectives. These are: the Internet as a teaching and learning tool, assisting students in understanding the applications of the Internet in the tourism industry, developing student's operational Internet skills.

Keywords: Internet, tourism, education, academics, teaching

JEL Classification: L83, M10, M15

The purpose of this paper is to raise issues identified by tourism and hospitality academics related to the use of the Internet in travel and tourism education. The benefits and challenges of using the Internet are described in a general manner.

The use of the Internet for education is growing rapidly. The term "Internet" is often used erroneously as a synonym for the World Wide Web. In fact, the term is far broader, including all forms of electronic communication involving a computer, and all information placed on the World Wide Web that is accessed using software called browsers.

From modest beginning the Internet has now become a mainstream educational tool, used for teaching and scholarly research purposes. Students are keen to use it, and in some cases possess greater skills than academics. Moreover, industry is increasingly demanding that graduates are Internet literate.

The rapid evolution of the Internet brings with it a number of challenges. Even though it is in common use, questions have been raised about how well it is being used. Moreover, the pace of technological evolution has been so rapid that it has outstripped the ability of many academics to keep up with it. While most educators agree the Internet is changing the nature of tourism education and research, many academics and educational institutions alike are struggling to determine how to use it more effectively.

The purpose of this paper is to raise issues relating to opportunities and challenges posed by the Internet in tourism education

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The relationship between tourism education and the Internet can be viewed from three perspectives. These are:

- the Internet as a teaching and learning tool,
- assisting students in understanding the applications of the Internet in the tourism industry,
- developing student's operational Internet skills.

The Internet is revolutionizing how tourism education is taught. Increasingly, hospitality and tourism courses view the Internet as a major means of information transmission and communication. Currently use of the Internet in tourism education varies from simple email communications between lecturers and students to subject and entire degrees being offered online.

But, the Internet is more than an alternative educational platform. Exposing students to the Internet in a teaching and learning environment also assists them in understanding its applications in the tourism industry. While predictions about the speed of growth of use of the Internet by travelers vary all reports predict continued strong growth as the technology improves and access becomes a given, rather than a feature, of people's lives. As a result, students need to develop an appreciation of how fundamental the changes to tourism promotion and purchasing behavior will be as a result.

Students also need to develop operational Internet skills if they wish to be competitive in the job market once they graduate. Increasingly, employers are looking for graduates who possess these skills. As a result, many tourism departments which offer training in IT packages designed for tourism, such as airline or hotel reservation software, are now offering additional topics, and in some cases subjects that ensure students gain operational Internet skills.

Tourism academics have a strong role to play in facilitating the achievement of each of these three perspectives. In order to fulfill this role, academics need to consider the Internet and tourism education from all three perspectives. The Internet brings with it a number of opportunities to enhance the quality of tourism education and research.

But, as with all new technologies whose benefits are still being determined, there are also some inherent risks that the technology will be misused and that its benefits will not be fully felt.

The technological infrastructure of the Internet has significant potential to enable a social architecture to exist amongst students and teachers describes a social architecture as an environment that enables a sense of community, personal relationship, trust and caring, willingness to share, and a commitment to mutual support and learning. Some of the benefits of computer - mediated communication environments - both synchronous and asynchronous are as follows:

- communication amongst lecturers and students that either irregularly, or never, have face-to-face contact such as for students studying by distance education,
- interaction among students, and between the lecturer and students, is

facilitated as traveling and scheduling difficulties are reduced due to the ability to send and receive messages 24 hours a day, 7 days a week,

- the ability to promote reflective and critical thinking as concepts and topics are debated and critiqued in electronic communities where a transcript of messages is available,

- support for students hesitant to directly approach a lecturer or to discuss matters with their peers face-to-face.

- support for students, especially those for whom the language of instruction is a second language, through the use of asynchronous communication tools that allow students time to interpret a message, reflect upon its meaning and compose a response.

Arguably, the greatest impact the Internet has had on tourism education is that it has revolutionized the amount of information academics and students alike can access. One can now access more information from more sources than ever before, which provides new teaching and learning opportunities. The explosion in the amount of information available presents both opportunities and, as discussed elsewhere, challenges for tourism educators. Moreover, the quality and currency of information available and the array of sources from which information can be gathered is changing how tourism programs are offered.

Students and researchers can now access many of the leading tourism journals online through their institution's library or directly via the World Wide Web, and gain access to abstracts of others electronically. Besides, through the use of sophisticated search techniques targeted searches on specific topics can be conducted. The result may be the ability to produce a comprehensive literature review faster and more thoroughly than ever before. The educational benefits to the student are self-evident. It also means that academic staff members may have to invest more time in their own background reading to remain current with the literature from a larger number of sources.

Opportunities also exist to teach tourism in "real-time" by encouraging students to access newspapers and news magazines online.

The communication facilitator and information source benefits of the Internet can promote cross-cultural understanding, allowing people relatively easy access to any information placed on the Web and supporting relatively easy communication amongst teachers and students that are geographically dispersed. The Web also enables students and teachers to access news and information from international sources, broadening their perspectives on the world. Online newspapers, radio stations and even television/video reports enable students and researchers to gain a better understanding of other cultures and lifestyles. Additionally, through Internet-based electronic communication tools students can discuss issues and conduct joint research with students from other countries.

Many students and lecturers feel stimulated, and improve their time on task, when using the Internet.

By incorporating the Internet into the curriculum it is possible to increase student's motivation to learn. A part of this motivational effect is that students realize that the Internet will affect them and, therefore, consider Internet literacy as being important to their professional futures.

From a constructivist perspective every learner is unique and knowledge is constructed in the mind of the learner. Therefore, each student benefits differently from different learning activities. The Internet has the potential to facilitate the provision of learning activities that use a variety of media techniques.

Study modes such as distance education that involve minimal, if any, face-to-face contact between the teacher and student have been provided by institutions of higher education for decades.

With the advent of the Internet, and more specifically the Web, many of these institutions are offering a greater variety of distance education study modes. The "mainly online" study mode is increasingly becoming another source of students, and consequently income, for universities.

While the development of the Internet can be traced back to the 1960s, it is only since the creation of the Web in the early 1990s that its use has become popular in the developed world. As a result, many institutions as well as academics are still in the exploratory or rapid growth stages of their Internet – expertise/use lifecycles. Consequently, most academics are still learning how to use the Internet effectively.

Of these challenges the amount, purpose and reliability of tourism related information posted on the Internet are probably the greatest issues facing tourism educators today.

The Internet contains an unimaginably large number of tourism and travel related Web sites. With so many potential sites it is not surprising that many people suffer from information overload. Many tourism academics and students do not have the patience to search for the best sites if they do not appear in the top 20 sites identified by a search engine, and neither do they know how to conduct a targeted search to filter out sites of limited educational value. As a result, the research process seems to be undergoing a radical change. The traditional paper based method of searching for information is to collect information, read and critique it, reflect upon, and then make sense of it.

Many students do not seem to consider the purpose and reliability of tourism material posted on the Internet, and as such do not appreciate its limitations. Much of what is presented in tourism sites is designed to attract potential visitors and not to educate tourism students.

A critical and developing role for academics is to ensure that the Internet is used to access appropriate and relevant material. This means that one of the roles teachers need to play is to become filters, and introduce the concepts of evaluation and judgment by recommending Web sites that have a degree of veracity and relevance to the subject at hand.

In traditional library based research, all material available has been vetted to

some degree before it has been placed on the stacks. As a result, students have developed confidence in the reliability and appropriateness of material available.

While the Internet can enable communication amongst students and teachers, it is less personal than face-to-face contact, where visual and tonal clues are present, and telephone contact where tonal clues remain.

In the tourism industry, communication and interpersonal skills are highly valued. There is a need to devote greater resources to the development of these skills in graduates such that the industry can deliver quality service. With the increasing use of the Internet for communication there is a threat to the industry of the more impersonal approach of the Internet flowing over into the workplace.

As previously discussed in this paper, employers are now expecting graduates to possess operational Internet skills, in addition to general computer skills. Consequently, a challenge for academics is the need to spend time in already crowded curricula helping students understand the fundamentals of Internet use. Added to this is the time and commitment necessary of the academics to maintain their Internet skills.

Tourism and hospitality education departments are facing the challenge of determining the extent to which the Internet should be part of the teaching and learning environment. As is evident from the discussion of the benefits of using the Internet, it is a tool for use in on-campus and distance education environments.

The on-campus environment offers face-to-face lectures and tutorials that many students value. While students are demanding more technology in higher education, most are not demanding it as a substitute for face-to-face teaching. For on-campus students the Internet can be an additional learning resource.

The provision of distance education through the Internet does offer benefits for certain student cohorts. As well, given the long and irregular working hours of the tourism industry the flexibility associated with distance education environments is attractive to many part-time students.

Issues also arise about access to the Internet and consequent concerns about educational equity. While many universities offer on-campus Internet laboratories for all students, demand far exceeds supply. Those who have home-based access may have an advantage over those students who cannot afford to be online.

In the majority of the world there are far more pressing needs than access to the Internet.

Given the embryonic nature of education using the Internet is it difficult to complete a cost-benefit analysis. However, educators are becoming increasingly aware of the many costs. Non-financial costs include the time of the teacher and support staff, in finding and evaluating information, moderating electronic discussion, and designing and developing Web sites. In relation to courses where the dominant delivery mechanism is the Internet, there is potential for the quality of the education to decrease if administrators adopt a policy of employing part-time teachers that are told to "teach" using the existing online material.

At the moment there are few indications that the often-purported long term cost savings to the education sector, often used as an argument to encourage Internet development, will be realized.

The success of using the Internet in tourism education depends on the ability of staff to use the technology effectively.

Most tourism academics indicated that they use the Internet as a communications tool or to search for information on the Web that is, subsequently, used in a subject. However, apart from these simple operational skills, skill levels and the consequent ability to use the Internet effectively, decline rapidly.

When research and scholarly work is considered, most academics have strong operational skills to conduct library searches, visit tourism-related Web sites and use online journals. However, their use of the Internet for more sophisticated scholarship activities likewise declines rapidly. Only about one quarter has conducted a survey using the Internet and a similar number of people have posted a message on a tourism related electronic discussion board. Few have attended virtual conferences.

The survey results indicate that while tourism academics are using the Internet for teaching and scholarship, its use – especially as a communication facilitator – is not being maximized. As this is a major benefit of using the Internet, and can assist in developing cross – cultural understanding, the results from this small-scale survey indicate that greater effort may be necessary to integrate asynchronous and synchronous communication tools into the teaching and learning environment.

Conclusion

Tourism graduates are increasingly being expected to have an understanding of the applications of the Internet in the tourism industry, and to have operational Internet skills. Academics, by incorporating the Internet into the teaching and learning environment help students in achieving these employment criteria. In order to teach effectively about, and how to use, the Internet they need to maintain their:

- understanding of the impact on the tourism industry,
- operational skills,
- understanding of appropriate teaching methods that minimize the potential disadvantages.

Benefits of integrating the Internet into the environment include its use as communication facilitator and as a source of information. However, one needs to be aware of the attendant risks, such as information overload and lack of reliability. From the small-scale survey it is evident that greater effort is necessary to maximize the appropriate use of the Internet for tourism teaching and scholarship. Academics face challenging times.

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